A Lonely Place
Mark 6:30-37
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How do you spen that block of time in our worship service described "A Period of Silent Prayer and Reflection"? For some people it is absorbed in parking the car, but assuming that you are here a few minutes before the service begins, what do you do with those moments? There is in the bulletin, every week, a prayer, or a paragraph, chosen to stimulate your thinking, before we engage in corporate worship together. But one of the abiding mysteries of my ministry among you is the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of this little ploy. Not once has some one said to me, "That was a great period of silent prayer and reflection." So - partly out of curiosity, and partly for a much deeper and much more serious reason, I would like to know what you do in those moments, and whether or not the devotional helps at your disposal are worth printing in the bulletin.

I know of one church in my home town that was notorious for its carnival-like atmosphere preceeding worship. The congregation spent those moments discussing the weather, the ball game yesterday, the absence or presence of other members. The church also had an excellent organist - during whose preludes these conversations transpired. Predictably the volume of the prelude determined the volume with which one had to talk with one's neighbor. On one particular Sunday the organist took it upon himself to strike a blow of retalliation. His prelude was joyful and loud, accompanied as usual by the conversations of the congregation carried on in normal voice. Suddenly - in the midst of a crescendo, with all the stops out - with the sound of the magnificient organ clashing with the raised voices of the people - he stopped playing. And there they were, nearly yelling at each other. The point was well made, and the minutes before worship were noticeably quieter for some time to come.

I know that I never fail to be impressed with the attitude of quiet

reverence in a Roman Catholic Church prior to the beginning of the mass. And I know that this is one of the impressions made on our Junior Highs when they attend mass as part of their communicant training. I know that in my own experience there are very few times and opportunities for solitude and reflection. In fact the only one I can recall that has anything to do with formal worship took place at a camp I attended as a child. Every evening after dinner we walked to a hill for vespers. And the rule stipulated no talking from the time one left the road until one came back down afterward. Now there are plenty of ways to communicate other than verbally, and we employed them with a great deal of ingenuity. Affection for a cute girl might be conveyed, for instance, by a well-aimed pine cone, lobbed in her direction. Nevertheless, when I try to recall experiences of quiet reflection, I can only remember those - the trees, birds, setting sun - the ministers whose words I have long since forgotten. In the midst of that, in spite of the coerced reverence, and the adolescent distractions, a person had to think and reflect and become conscious of self in a new way. It was good and it hasn't happened to me much since. In fact, the only time for reflecting in solitude now seems to be as I wage silent war against the weeds, which at least has the advantage of forcing me to be on my knees.

In any case, part of Christian experience - particularly worship experience, ought to be devotional, reflective. Part of our practice of personal faith ought to include meditation, silent prayer, and if not that, at least times in which we are totally alone with ourselves and our thoughts.

There are, however, two phenomena, that prevent this from ahappening. The first is our culture which is anything but reflective and quiet. The second is that quiet, reflective moments can be difficult and sometimes painful. Yet, given these two impediments - and we shall deal with both of them - one of the basic needs of persons is for rest, renewal, rejuvantion: for experiences of re-creation, or recreation. But it is, at the same time, the basic human need, that receives the least amount of attention.

All of that was precipitated by a little vignette from the Gospel according to Mark - which appeared on the lectionary for the Sunday of my return from vacation. A happy coincidence, by the way, for this family returns from a vacation - as do most of you - in a kind of nervous shock, needing nothing so much as the relative restfulness of the busy daily routine.

Early in his ministry Jesus sent the apostles out, two by two, for a field trip in discipleship. Their instructions were to visit the villages of Galilea, teaching, preaching and healing. The success of their venture is documented by the fact that King Herod thought John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had returned to life. In any case, they returned to Jesus, tired we might assume, physically and emotionally exhausted. And Jesus said, "Come with me, by yourselves, to some lonely place where you can rest quietly." Mark adds, paranthetically, "For they had no liesure even to eat, so many were coming and going."

They needed, that is to say, an experience of re-creation: a place to go to be alone with their thoughts and their Lord. It was his prescription for their immediate need and I don't think it is over-interpretation to suggest that there is a word here for us. For, as I suggested earlier, most of us are strangers to this kind of experience and that we have - all of us - a basic need for reflection and solitude, or simply a lonely place.

Two impediments stand in the way: the first is cultural. Visitors to our country are amazed at many things, chief among them the speed of our common life style. Persons from other cultures find simply incomprehensible the frantic rate of life lived by most Americans. There is no obvious liesure, everyone is in a hurry, life is not complete unless every waking moment is crammed with activity. Consider, for instance, the devise of the porch swing. You don't see many any more, and they symbolize a dying life style that included long evenings spent swinging gently, talking when necessary, but mostly just swinging and thinking. We don't have time for that any more.

Even vacation - that time for putting our lives back together, that time specifically and particularly set apart for re-creation becomes just another set of goals to be accomplished and an agenda to be attacked with vigor and determination. The best illustration I can think of comes again out of recent experience, The Atlantic City expressway - route to the liesurely pace of life on the sea shore is so crammed with determined motorists that one feels a sense of accomplishment simply arriving without a major accident. And I think I sensed in the grim faces of fellow vacationers, - and a little bit in myself, an ironic sense of determination that this is going to be fun or else. The fact is, we don't take vacations - we attack them, and they cost us more in terms of physical and emotional energy than our normal routine.

It's cultural , I believe. It is a spillover from the American work ethic which dictates that if you're not physically doing something you must be up to something immoral. It is part of our life style: it is part of me, I confess. I'm not sure it is all bad - but I do know that it makes reflection, solitude, quiet, meditation, a rare experience indeed.

The other impediment is that the very nature of quiet reflection is difficult and sometimes unpleasant. There is no doubt that one of the surest methods of escapism, other than drugs and alcohol, is busyness. If we can simply keep busy - keep mind and body occupied - we won't have to confront our problems, unresolved dilemmas, quiet, frustration,unmet needs. And again this is not always bad - in fact, it is sometimes therapeutic. But when it becomes escapism - it is personally destructive.

For in solitude, in the lonely place, that which we meet is none other than self. In quiet moments we are aware of ourselves - our bodies, our minds, our feelings. In lonely places we cannot avoid awareness of our weaknesses and our strengths. We cannot avoid awareness of failures as well as successes, unkept promises, unsaid words, undone deeds. In reflection

we develop "self-awareness" which is absolutely essential to mature, adult life. But it is not always a pleasant experience. Sometimes we would rather avoid the person we encounter when we are alone. And so rather than seeking out the experience we try not to let it happen. We switch on the car radio rather than live with our thoughts, or turn on T.V. rather than reflect in silence.

A philosopher once observed that no man can spend more than a few minutes of thought alone, without thinking about God. I find that to be true, not in the sense of thinking up next week's sermon; but in the kind of mystical way that quiet moments always seem to drive me back to some fundamental things like God and life and death and the world and my small role in it. In June I attended a seminar at a church retreat center in New Mexico. Beyond the content of the seminar which had to do with process planning, I will long remember two experiences which for me were rare. One involved a walk at night time - alone - simply to fill time. The ranch is totally isolated: miles from the nearest road - and at night utterly and absolutely quiet. The sky was bright with stars - and I found it quite impossible not to contemplate the creator God. The other occasion was a horse back ride up into the surrounding mountains. I knew no one else on the trip, and other than maintaining my precarious position in the saddle had nothing to occupy my mind except the wind and sky and mountains, and again I experienced a new sense of the omnipotence and omnitience of God the creator.

I find intriguing the diaries of men who are lost on hunting trips, or in light plane accidents, or at sea. Almost without exception, the enforced isolation drives the thought processes to deep and basic matters. For it is impossible to be alone long without thinking about God.

The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer was instrumental in establishing an underground seminary for German pastors during the Nazi era. He wrote a little manual for this unique community entitled "Life Together". In it

he says, over and over again, that the daily discipline must include regular moments of meditation and reflection. For this fine thinker, who could have held down a chair in the Philosophy Department of any university in the world, moments of quiet reflecting were the very bread of life. I mention him because his faith led him a step further than the philosopher's statement that lonely thinking leads inevitably to God. It was Bonhoeffer's conviction that God comes to men in this experience: that it is not just the meandering of an idle mind that forces men to confront themselves and contemplate deep things. Rather it is the restless spirit of God speaking to the spirit of man: the alive word of God addressing the open mind of man: the risen Christ touching the lives of men.

Not exclusively. He was not urging a return to the contemplative life of the monks. In fact he left his academic community to participate in an assination attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler. He well knew that the life of discipleship - your life and mine - is lived in the moral ambuguity of the world: and that we serve Christ out there where men bleed and get fired and get divorced and commit crimes or our service is lip service only. He knew well the wordliness of Christian discipleship. But he also knew that apart from this deep communion with Jesus Christ it was a sterile worldliness. And he knew that reflection, solitide, a lonely place was all he had by way of re-creation.

Jesus was sensitive to this need in his disciples. The great men of faith down through the centuries have been sensitive to this need in themselves. Can it be less important for us? Take time: make time in which the waters of your spirit can flow deeply: in which your thinking can run freely: in which the Spirit of God can speak to your spirit. Find your lonely place. Amen.

For our prayer this morning I would share with you the words of John Baillie, great theologian, who wrote a classic of devotional literature under the title""A diary of Private Prayer" This from an evening prayer for the Twenty-sixth day. Let us pray: